Repairing Pairs

Review Essay

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J. Richard Hackman

Diana McLain Smith. *Divide or Conquer: How Great Teams Turn Conflict into Strength*. New York: Portfolio Hardcover, 2008. 304 pages. $25.95 (hardcover), ISBN: 1-5918-4204-2.

Relationships in Context

An organization is like a fishnet: it is full of knots, and you get to decide which one to use to pull the net up. Regardless of the knot you choose, once you start pulling, the whole network gradually comes into view. Diana McLain Smith's choice of a "knot" for understanding organizational life is relationships. If you focus on the relational dynamics among organizational leaders, she writes, you eventually will understand most of what you need to know about how that organization — or at least its leadership team — operates. And if you can help leaders improve their relationships, broader organizational improvements are almost certain to follow.

Smith's focus on dyadic relationships contrasts with standard psychological and sociological paradigms for organizational analysis and intervention. The *psychological approach*, as well as that of most lay observers, gives greatest attention to the personality and style of individual leaders. Indeed, the impulse to attribute responsibility for collective outcomes to the leader is so pervasive and powerful that my colleague Ruth Wageman and I have given it a name, the "leader attribution error." The *sociological approach* takes nearly the opposite position: the fates of collectives are determined mainly by external forces over which leaders have little control. Although leaders may organize, plan, and direct, they are mostly just along for the ride. And scholars of teams, including myself, take something of *a middle position*: we argue that how effectively leaders structure and

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arrange supports for their teams makes most of the difference. If leaders create the right conditions, then the chances increase that a team will enter into a positive spiral that, eventually, will generate both healthier group interaction and better team performance. So, Smith's view that *relationships* are the key provides, at minimum, a refreshing alternative to contemporary scholarly thought and consulting practice.

But is her view correct? Smith's claims are audacious: ". . . relationships seem to operate independently of anything we do or want or intend. If they go well, everything else goes well. If they go poorly, everything else goes to hell. . . . [Two decades of research has] convinced me . . . that relationships may be the single most underutilized lever for transforming the performance of teams and organizations" (p. 6). Judging from the many engaging case examples that pervade this book, her claims have merit. Having firmly grasped the relationship knot of the organizational fishnet, Smith does succeed in pulling the whole thing up. Her insightful analyses of troubled relationships and her masterful interventions to improve them, described in great detail, clearly did alter the leadership and organizational dynamics of the enterprises in which she did her work.

It Takes a Master

Make no mistake about it — Smith *is* a master at what she does. Her ability to analyze complex relationship dynamics and to craft interventions that help people understand and improve them is extraordinary. And, to her great credit, Smith does not conclude by saying, "Look what I was able to understand and at the help I was able to provide," which would leave readers duly impressed with her but without concrete guidance for themselves. Instead, she provides specific tools that readers actually can use both to analyze their work relationships and to guide their attempts to improve them. The result is a book crammed full of diagrams and lists — lots and lots of them — that enumerate the specific steps people can take in strengthening troubled organizational relationships.

To illustrate, here (from p. 108) is the list of steps she advises readers to take to map the patterns of interaction in a relationship before proceeding with work to improve it:

- Identify one or two interactions that illustrate the concerns raised in your [prior] relationship assessment.
- Capture the interaction by taping or taking close notes on what you each said and on what you each felt and thought at the time.
- Describe in concrete terms what you each did (and did not do); do not speculate about what you were trying to do or intending to do.
- Describe your reactions (what you were actually thinking and feeling at the time); do not justify, interpret, or explain them.

- Organize your description into a map that shows how each of your actions contributed to reactions that make the other's actions more understandable.
- Calibrate your map by modifying or adding to it based on what happens in other interactions.
- If, based on the map, you both want to invest further, proceed [to the next step].

Clearly, this is not a book that touts a "one-minute" relationship fix. Nor does it require readers to master and then apply a complex and abstract academic theory whose link to real organizational life is tenuous. Instead, what Smith offers respects both the complexity of relationships and the considerable challenge of improving them. But could we mere mortals do what she does with equally good effect? Or does her elegant distillation of what she does in her consulting practice run the risk of misleading readers? Might those of us who do not have her skill and experience follow the steps she lays out but wind up making a mess rather than improving our relationships?

To address those questions, let us look first at Smith's overall model for relationship change, which she breaks down into three stages: (1) disrupt existing patterns, (2) reframe the relationship, and (3) revise the relationship based on what has been learned thus far. Each of the three stages consists of three specific steps to be taken, and Smith provides concrete guidance for carrying out each step. The steps within the "disrupt" stage, for example, are "assess the relationship," "map patterns of interaction" (see the list above), and "design action experiments" to try out nontraditional ways of interacting. These stages and steps clearly guide Smith in her own consulting work. But what if the focal relationship were between a chief executive and a chief operating officer, both of whom were headstrong and firmly set in their ways? And what if the substantive issues being dealt with by these leaders were highly challenging and consequential both for the leaders themselves and for the organization as a whole? Would the CEO and COO be willing to proceed on their own through all the steps Smith lays out? Would they be *able* to do so?

My guess is that they would not even get through step one of stage one. Indeed, the more troubled and stressful the relationship, the more likely that the individuals would rely on their own well-learned responses for dealing with troubles than go through Smith's protocol in hopes of learning something new. So, for all Smith's care in laying out the details of her relationship-improvement process, it may still be necessary for leaders experiencing dysfunctional and consequential conflict to have a Diana Smith on hand as they work together to make things better.

Does one actually need an advanced degree and extensive experience to do what Smith does? Not necessarily, as she illustrates in a fascinating historical case in the last chapter, which describes how Abraham Lincoln dealt with some extremely difficult relationships during his presidency. My concern is that there may not be all that many Diana Smiths and Abraham Lincolns available in workaday organizations. Although some leaders do deal naturally and well with difficult relational dynamics, that capability does not appear to be widely distributed in the population — not even among senior organizational leaders.

Even so, the principles upon which Smith's relationship-improvement process is erected are worthy of careful study even if one does not intend to carry out the specific steps in her protocol. Perhaps most important of all is to develop what she calls a "relationship sensibility." This means becoming more aware of relational dynamics than many of us usually are, deliberately attending to what is going on in the relationship *qua* relationship. That is harder than it may sound. It means temporarily setting aside one's natural tendency to make dispositional attributions regarding the other person's skills, styles, or motives, as well as suppressing the impulse to explain one's own actions as necessary and fully appropriate responses to some contextual change. To focus on relational dynamics is to open possibilities for change that one otherwise might miss.

Another constructive step that Smith recommends is to become attentive to how one frames what is going on in a relationship and then, after reflection, to *re*frame what is transpiring in a way that increases the chances that both parties can manage their difficulties competently. We all have our particular "hot buttons," and once our relational partner pushes one of them, an escalation is likely to occur, with each person waiting, perhaps for a long time, for the other to cool down. The best way to avoid such waiting games, Smith proposes, "is for people to *help each other shift perspective, so they can regain their collective cool*" (p. 84, italics in original). Shifting the perspective from the substantive focus of an intense conflict to the management of the relationship itself will not neutralize the strong feelings that the conflict has evoked. But it does make it easier, she says, for participants to use those feelings to think things through together.

A third suggestion is to work hard to develop a habit of mind that focuses on actual behavior rather than on inferred motives or agendas: "Instead of speculating about what people are *trying* to do, you simply observe what they *are* doing" (p. 99, italics in original). But in the chapter on revising what one "knows" to be true (chapter 7), Smith discusses the virtues of reviewing participants' personal histories, even to the extent of sharing stories of significant events from childhood, to explore how what happened in the past might shape the dynamics of one's present relationships. I am less convinced than she is about the value of such explorations, preferring instead to keep motivational inferences at a safe distance, as

illustrated by Smith herself in two alternative accounts of an encounter between Dick and Jane: "Dick said, 'See Spot! Look at Spot run!' Jane said, 'Run, Spot, run!' " Compare that to: "Dick vied for Jane's affections by showing her something he believed she'd find interesting. She pretended to show her affection by looking at what he showed her" (p. 235).

Window or Lever?

For all that is to be learned from this wise, engaging, and beautifully written book, there remains one major and unresolved issue: choice of knot. In my own area of study, group behavior, researchers have extensively studied the degree to which the quality of member relationships affects collective performance. Findings have not been reassuring. Although interventions that focus directly and primarily on enhancing the quality of relationships among members usually succeed in changing member attitudes and sometimes also affect behavior in the group, they have had no consistent effects on group performance. (Interventions that structure or even eliminate group interaction to head off the possibility of dysfunctional social processes, however, have been shown to be helpful.)

Research on group behavior, then, raises the possibility that the quality of members' interactions and relationships may be more valuable as an *indicator* of how a group is doing (i.e., as a diagnostic window through which one can view relationship dynamics) than as a powerful point of leverage for constructive change. Indeed, it may even be that the direction of the causal arrow is the opposite of what we usually assume — that is, the quality of members' interactions is more a *consequence* than a *cause* of how well the organization is operating. In some matrix-type organizations, for example, persistent relational difficulties are virtually a sure thing. In such circumstances, even highly competent interventions that focus attention on improving the quality of members' relationships may be overwhelmed by stronger structural forces and, therefore, have little staying power.

For all the book's many strengths, there are some curious omissions. The book includes little material, for example, on how inter*group* forces drive relationship dynamics in organizations, even though the enormous power of such forces is well known. Little is said about the dynamics of multiple, simultaneous relationships, which are perhaps more the rule than the exception for senior leaders. The book's title, which says readers will learn "how great teams turn conflict into strength," is also problematic: the book actually includes little about teams — it is almost all about relationships among pairs of senior leaders.

These are merely quibbles, however. In fact, the book is a gem. It sits precisely at the intersection of theory and practice, which is where so many writers claim to be, but so few actually are. The insightful analyses of concrete cases are buttressed by extensive citations (in endnotes) of

scholarly sources. The behavioral guidance provided, although surely requiring greater skill and emotional maturity than Smith acknowledges, is thoughtful and sensible. And, finally, the book somehow manages to be simultaneously funny and serious. Readers will find it as engaging to read as it is rich with insight about how to manage relationships in organizations in ways that fuel rather than drain the energy and commitment of both parties.